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Montgomery council at-large candidates talk business, transportation

Chambers of commerce hold Democratic forum

by Erin Cunningham | Staff Writer

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Eight candidates for at-large seats on the Montgomery County Council appeared to agree on at least two things Monday: The county needs more jobs and better transportation.

At a candidate forum, four incumbent members talked about actions they have taken to improve economic development, transit options and traffic congestion, while challengers pointed out problems — and what they say are potential solutions.

The candidates also discussed the county budget.

The forum, sponsored by the Gaithersburg-Germantown Chamber of Commerce and the Rockville chamber, drew eight of the 10 Democratic at-large candidates competing in the primary election. About 75 people attended.

The other two candidates — Donald Coffey and Raj Narayanan — were invited to the two-hour event at the BlackRock Center for the Arts in Germantown, chamber officials said.

Councilman George L. Leventhal (D) of Takoma Park said his focus is on drawing high-wage, high-tech, science-based jobs to the area.

The key, he said, is to send a message to businesses that the county is business-friendly.

Leventhal was a founding member of Bethesda Green, the first green jobs incubator in the county.

Leventhal and the other candidates said they supported the Purple Line, the long-planned Corridor Cities Transitway and other transportation projects.

Challenger Hans Riemer, 37, of Silver Spring, who worked on President Barack Obama's campaign, said business, housing and transportation are linked.

"People need affordable housing," Riemer said. "But so do businesses. They're not going to come here if leases aren't affordable — or if the work force can't find a place to live."

Housing should be built near transit, he said.

Council President Nancy M. Floreen (D) of Garrett Park said a private-public Business Development Authority she proposed in January will include business and community leaders focused on economic development.

Floreen also said discussions on transit mobility should include a focus on highway congestion and improvements to Interstate 270.

Jane de Winter, 50, an economist who lives in Kensington, said the county needs to bring more business leaders into discussions about how to draw jobs to the county.

The county's development approval process is too cumbersome and should be changed, she said.

"It takes three to four times as long to get something done in the county," de Winter said.

Councilman Marc Elrich (D) of Takoma Park said the county's development approval process needs to be "understandable, transparent and clear."

Elrich said his proposal for countywide Bus Rapid Transit could be up and running within the next few years and provide cost-effective ways to move people between home and work — relieving traffic congestion.

"It is possible to do things in our lifetime if we are serious about it, and I intend to be serious about it," he said.

Challenger Fred Evans, a longtime educator, said there is a "driving mentality" in the county, and officials need to consider whether residents will use the transit systems that are available.

Evans, a former teacher and administrator in the county, also said the Montgomery County Public Schools budget should be scrutinized for overspending.

"We have to look at the value of our money and our taxes as well as whether we raise taxes or not," he said, criticizing "add-on" taxes, such as the county's cell phone tax.

When asked, none of the candidates said he or she supports raising taxes.

Councilwoman Duchy Trachtenberg (D) of North Bethesda also highlighted her commitment to fiscal discipline, saying she first proposed decreasing cost-of-living raises for employees two years ago.

"In order to pay for what we need to provide we need to restructure the way we deliver services and become more business-friendly," said Trachtenberg, a first-term council member.

She has been a "voice of discipline" on the council even before the current economic downturn began, Trachtenberg said.

Candidate Becky Wagner, executive director at Interfaith Works for 11 years, said the council should look to cut some of the county budget's "bells and whistles."

"We can't spend money that we don't have," she said.

Wagner questioned why the council did not see the economic recession coming.

"I bet you saw it coming," Wagner said to the audience.